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THREE THEORISTS OF THE THEATRE

PART II

By PROFESSOR BRANDER MATTHEWS

THE modern appreciation of Aristotle dates from Lessing, the one dramatic critic in any modern literature who deserves to be mentioned in the same breath with him. It was Lessing who brushed aside the swarm of commentators to scrutinize the actual text of Aristotle and to see for himself what the Greek had actually said and what he actually meant. Lessing it was who made the pregnant suggestion that if we seek a full understanding of the "Poetics" we must consider that truncated treatise in connection with Aristotle's better preserved "Rhetoric" and "Ethics." We may hail Lessing, even though he was greatly stimulated by Diderot, as the real leader of the movement to repeal the Classicist code of the drama, erected mainly upon the misunderstanding and the misinterpretation of Aristotle.

Perhaps Lessing suffers today from the complete success of his polemic against the French critics who had adopted the windspun and wire-drawn theories of the Italians. In his day and in his country it seems to have been generally believed that French tragedy was a revival of Greek tragedy and possibly even an improvement upon it. Nowadays we see so clearly that there was no basis for this belief, that we find it difficult to understand how anybody could ever have held it; and therefore we are inclined to wonder why Lessing was so persistent in his demonstration of its absurdity. This is the inevitable disadvantage of all triumphant polemic; and when the victory is once won, we fail to perceive the necessity for killing the dead over and over again. This is a disadvantage from which Aristotle's criticism is free, since he knew—and could know—only the drama of his own tongue.

Lessing is never overawed by the authority of Aristotle; but he insists, first of all, on being shown the Greek's own words. He permits no predecessor to hold him in pupilage, preferring to do his own thinking in his own fashion. He denies the jurisdiction of the French and the Italian and the Latin critics, tamely accepted by his contemporaries in Germany. He takes nothing for granted; and he insists on going back to first principles. He analyzes the judgments of those who have gone before; and he accepts their verdicts only when he himself finds the decision in accord with the facts.

French criticism of the acted drama from the Abbé d'Aubignac to Nepomucène Lemercier is not so foolish as those who have never read it may be inclined to suppose. The Classicist code is hard and narrow and it imposes upon its interpreters not a few absurdities; but these interpreters make many shrewd suggestions here and there. Lessing's superiority to the French critics is due partly to his broader equipment, his wider range of vision, and partly to his keener insight. Marmontel's advice to aspiring playwrights is rich in sensible remarks; but where Marmontel only scratches the surface, Lessing cuts to the core. Lemercier's twenty-five rules for tragedy and his twenty-two rules for comedy, although pedantically promulgat-

ed, are most of them acceptable enough; but Lessing does not descend to externalities like these, being moved always to ascertain the inner qualities which alone vitalize a work of art. Diderot, from whom Lessing borrows a great deal—combating French influence with arms captured from a Frenchman—is fertile in suggestive ideas, but he is rarely trustworthy; and the author of the "Laocoön" is ever a sounder critic of art than the author of the "Paradox on the Comedian." The German never lets himself be led astray by his own theories and he achieves a consistency denied to the gifted but irregular Frenchman, partly because his equipment is more solid and partly because his insight is more penetrating.

LESSING AND DIDEROT

In his preface to the French translation of the "Hamburg Dramaturgy" Mezières had no difficulty in showing the extent of Lessing's indebtedness to Diderot and also in exhibiting Lessing's occasionally erratic opinions. Mezières pointed out that Lessing allows himself the astounding liberty of calling the comedy of Destouches finer than the comedy of Molière, and of vaunting his own ability to rehandle the themes of Corneille and Racine more effectively than they had done. It is true that Lessing was not only a critic of the drama but also a creator of it, and that his own plays are the earliest of German dramas to establish themselves in the theater and to keep the stage after a century and a half. But this does not justify his airy vaunting that he could surpass Corneille and Racine in their own field.

The explanation of his uncharacteristic boast is to be found in the fact that Lessing was fighting Voltaire, and that he was thus tempted to disparage Corneille and Racine in whose footsteps Voltaire was following. The German critic-creator wished to explode the belief of his countrymen in the infallibility of French criticism and in the indisputable superiority of French tragedy; and in the ardor of battle he was not always so particular as he might be in the choice of weapons he snatched up for attack and defence. As Lowell pointed out, Lessing's intellect "was commonly stirred to motion by the impulse of other minds, and struck out its brightest flashes by collision with them." It must be remembered also that Lessing's discussion of dramatic art is not a treatise like Aristotle's, written out at leisure after full premeditation; it is a journalistic job, composed from day to day; and its successive chapters, if they may be so called, are evoked by the particular plays which chanced to be produced at the Hamburg theater. Very few of these plays are known today even by name except to readers of the "Dramaturgy." It is testimony to Lessing's critical faculty that he could find a suggestive text for shrewd comment in pretentious German pieces and in artless German adaptations from contemporary French drama. As subject matter for discussion, Lessing lacked precisely what Aristotle had,—a living dramatic litera-

ture in his own language. Nor had he been privileged to behold on the stage, where only a drama can disclose its full force, any of the masterpieces of Shakspeare and Calderon with which he had acquainted himself in the study. Where Aristotle had a body of doctrine clearly and completely thought out before he began on his book, Lessing had to extemporize his opinions from day to day during his single year service as theatrical critic. There need be no wonder that the "Hamburg Dramaturgy" is not compact; and the real cause for surprise is that the collected articles are as coherent and as consistent as they are. Nor is there any necessity to deny that some of these articles reveal themselves now as mere journalism, sufficient unto the day but lacking in permanence, or that Lessing does not hesitate now and again to avail himself of the privileges of the journalist,—to reiterate, to exaggerate even, if need be, to emphasize his assertions by overstatement so as to force his casual readers to apprehend his meaning. That there are dry places here and there is due to the aridity of the plays he had perforce to deal with. This was unfortunate for Lessing who seems to have wearied of his newspaper task before the year of his servitude was out; and it was also unfortunate for us, since the finer the work of art to be criticised the more strenuously is likely to be the effort of the critic to appreciate it worthily.

LESSING AND VOLTAIRE

Even if the year's work which makes up the "Hamburg Dramaturgy" must be described as journalism, still bearing the traces of its newspaper origin, we cannot but recognize in Lessing an incomparable journalist, without peer in insight and in equipment, abundant in sympathy for what is best,—although a little lacking in disinterestedness so far as the French are concerned. And for journalism his style is exactly adapted. He is so clear, so sharp-sighted, so plain-spoken, so affluent in common-sense that he frequently appears to be witty, although his wit is rarely verbal or merely wit for its own sake. It never has the flashing felicity of Voltaire's style—of that Voltaire whom Lessing admires even while attacking. It was from Voltaire that Lessing borrowed the useful device of using narrative as an implicit criticism of the plot under consideration. And like Voltaire, Lessing is rich in quotable passages, in summary sayings that cling to the memory. From the poorest of plays he can draw a valuable precept of playmaking; and his maxims are eternally significant, however ephemeral the piece that called them forth.

Yet few of the precepts of playmaking, rooted as they are in common-sense and instantly acceptable by all students of the stage, can be detached from the criticism of the specific pieces that evoked them. He restates principles laid down by Aristotle; he clarifies pregnant sayings of Diderot; he may have derived from d'Aubignac the belief that unflinching fidelity to the accidental facts of history is not to be demanded from the writer of a historical play,—although he may have found this implicit in one of Aristotle's paragraphs. He is forever going back to the great Greek and he is incessant in declaring that, after all, Aristotle was not a Frenchman. He is quite as insistent in tackling Voltaire and in asserting that after all,

the great Frenchman was not a Greek. He spends half a hundred pages to prove that Voltaire took his "Mérope" from Maffei and failed to better it in the borrowing. He seems to be superabundant in quotation. He is often more negative than affirmative, more anxious to discredit the French critics and to disestablish the classicist theorists than to declare his own sounder and saner principles.

IV

Aristotle and Lessing are the two foremost theorists of the theater; and there is no third to be rankt with them. Yet at an interval after them and far in advance of any fourth claimant, comes Francisque Sarcey, inferior to both in insight and equipment, even if not inferior in sympathy and disinterestedness. He was a journalist like Lessing; but he did not confine his activity to a single year, continuing in fact for nearly two score years. He resembled Lessing again in that he did not begin with a body of doctrine, with a code of principles formulated in advance of any possible application. Like the English judges he developed the law slowly from the several cases that were brought before him, until at the last he arrived at a consciousness of the fundamental principles of the art he loved devotedly his whole life long.

Sarcey's body of doctrine, when once he was in possession of it, was his own; it was the result of his incomparable experience of the theater and of his incessant study of the spectators. As a consequence of his integrity and of his critical shrewdness, his doctrine is substantially identical with Aristotle's and with Lessing's. Independently he arrived at the same conclusions that they had reached before him. As he told me once, whenever he took down the French translation of the "Hamburg Dramaturgy" and found that Lessing had anticipated him in one of his own discoveries, he rejoiced, feeling thereby reinforced in his conviction that his discovery was solidly based on truth.

Sarcey is more narrowly a man of the theater than either Aristotle or Lessing; and this is perhaps a main reason why he does not deserve to be placed by their side. It is true that he had many outside interests and that he was an indefatigable writer on all sorts of topics, literary and social and political; but his heart was ever in the theater and to him the art of the drama had a supreme importance it had not to Lessing or to Aristotle, because they had a broader vision than he, a more comprehensive philosophy.

Yet whatever his limitations, he is the most inspiring and suggestive critic of the acted drama in the nineteenth century. Not so dogmatic as Brunetière, not so brilliant as Lemaître, not so multifarious as Faguet, he easily surpasses all three in his intimacy with the playhouse and with its people, actors as well as authors; and he is therefore a sounder critic of that part of the drama which is more specifically of the theater. His experience was far longer than Lessing's and his subject matter is richer and more varied. Where Aristotle had the Greek drama as his sole material for the deduction of his principles and where Lessing had only the plays which happened to be acted in a single German theater in a single year, even though he ranged at will in search of parallels.

throughout dramatic literature, Sarcey had all the theaters of the capital of France for forty years when they were representing not only the contemporary and the classic drama of his own tongue but also many of the masterpieces of the drama in other literatures, ancient and modern.

FRANCISQUE SARCEY

It may be admitted that Sarcey does not profit as he might by his opportunity to see on the stage the mightiest plays of Greece and England. He is too fundamentally a man of his own country, and even of his own time, really to relish Sophokles and Shakspeare. Moreover, he is a little inclined to be the slave of his own doctrine and to hold this a little too narrowly. He is only following the wise Aristotle and the shrewd Lessing when he insists on the superior importance of plot, of story, of action; but he goes ahead of them in his appreciation of the mechanical dexterity of plotmaking. In fact, he is inclined almost to accept skill in craftsmanship, the skill of a Scribe, for example, as the final word in dramatic accomplishment, instead of seeing clearly that this skill is only the first word. Construction, the adroit building up of a series of situations—this is the prime requisite of dramatic art, without which the art cannot exist; but it is only the beginning and it can never be an end in itself, as it was in the so-called "well-made play" of Scribe and of the cloud of collaborators and disciples that encompass Scribe about.

Still it must be urged that in insisting upon the duty of providing every play with an inner skeleton strong enough to support it unaided, even if he insisted at times a little too exclusively upon this, Sarcey was exerting a most wholesome influence, especially in these days when the novelists are invading the theater and when some of them seek to confuse the essential differences between the art of the drama and the art of prose-fiction. The first and foremost of these differences is due to the inimitable fact that the novel may appeal only to the individual reader whereas the play must appeal to a crowd of spectators. The theatre is "a function of the crowd," so a British critic has declared; and in so declaring he was only echoing Sarcey who asserted that he could deduce all the laws of dramatic art from the single fact that every play implies the presence of an audience. This is why Sarcey was so indefatigable in his observation of the playgoers and in his analysis of their characteristics, their predilections, their prejudices, their unconscious preferences. Here he is doing explicitly what Aristotle and Lessing had done implicitly.

Sarcey's attitude when he set himself down at the first performance of a new play was very like that of the burgher of Paris who ventured to take a hand in the exacerbated discussion evoked by Corneille's "Cid." "I have never read Aristotle and I know nothing about the Rules, but I decide upon the merit of a play in proportion to the pleasure I receive." Sarcey had read Aristotle and he was familiar with the Rules; but he judged tragedy and comedy, problem-play and farce, in proportion to the pleasure he himself received, but also and more particularly in proportion to the pleasure received by his fellow spectators. He came in time to be very expert in interpreting these unconscious

preferences of the crowd, which the dramatist has always to reckon with.

His very suggestive theory of the scenes inherent in every story which demand to be shown in action, the famous theory of the *scènes à faire*—the "obligatory scenes" as Mr. Archer has called them,—this was the result of his ability to translate the dumb disappointment of the playgoers when the dramatist neglects to set before their eyes the interesting episode he had led them to expect. This is one of Sarcey's most important contributions to the theory of the theater; and it is his own, although there are imitations of it in earlier writers—notably in Corneille's third "Discourse on the Dramatic Poem." Sarcey may have predecessors also in his theory of the necessary conventions of the drama. Every art can exist only by its departures from the facts of life; the painter and the sculptor, for example, are permitted to represent men as motionless although absolute absence of movement is impossible to human beings. The drama has its own departures from the facts of life; it demands the removal of the fourth wall of every room, the raising of the actor's voice even when he is supposed to be whispering, the condensation and heightening of the dialog, the suppression of everything accidental, although accident surrounds us on all sides. These liberties with life are for the benefit of the spectators in the theater, who want to see and to hear and have their interest focust upon the essentials of the story set before them on the stage; and by convention, that is by tacit agreement, by implied contract, the spectators gladly permit the playwright to depart from the facts of life so that he can delight them with the truth of life.

It is greatly to be regretted that Sarcey never composed his proposed "History of Dramatic Conventions"; but as he once said to me, "If I had ever written my book, with what could I fill my weekly articles?" Here he spoke out in accord with his frank and sturdy common-sense—that common-sense which according to Vauvenargues must be credited rather to character than to intellect.

The influence of Lessing on the contemporary German theater was due not so much to his dramatic criticism as to his dramatic creation,—to the three or four plays in which he proved that it was possible to put German life and German character on the stage at once effectively and sincerely. Sarcey may have written a trifling farce or two in his youth, but his influence on the contemporary French theater was due wholly to his criticism. He had the good fortune, denied to Lessing, of working in a period when there was a living dramatic literature in his own language. He was able to interpret and to encourage Augier and Dumas fils, Meilhac and Halévy, Labiche and Rostand, very much as Boileau had interpreted and encouraged Molière. The principles of playmaking these dramatists were applying were precisely those which Sarcey was proclaiming.

It is difficult to overestimate the influence exerted by Sarcey upon the development of the drama in France in the final third of the nineteenth century. His theories of the theater were adopted and disseminated by other critics, often by writers as different as Brunetière, Lemaître and Faguet. In

the main, and for years, this influence was helpful; yet a time came at last when Sarcey's principles, as he himself continued to declare them, were felt to be a little too narrow and a little too rigidly insisted upon. M. Gustave Lanson, for example, has denounced Sarcey for unduly confining his attention to technic, for overvaluing the form of a play at the expense of its content, and for following rather than guiding the taste of the public. There is a certain justice in these charges; and it may be admitted that in his old age Sarcey was a willing prisoner in his own code of the drama. But to grant this is not to deny the abiding utility of his contributions to the theory of the theater.

V

At bottom the body of doctrine which Sarcey built up for his own use as a critic of the acted drama is substantially the same as that which we find in Lessing and in Aristotle. These three theorists of the theater estimate plays primarily by the test of the playhouse and by analysis of the desires of the playgoers. The several playhouses in which the Greek and the German and the Frenchman took their seats varied widely in their physical conditions, in their dimensions and in their shapes. But these various playhouses had one characteristic in common, a characteristic which is to be discovered in almost every kind of theater before the final quarter of the nineteenth century. In all these playhouses, the actor was surrounded on three sides by the audience. In the Attic theater the performers stood in the orchestra which curved into the hillside of the Acropolis; in Shakspeare's theater, as in Molière's, certain spectators were accommodated with seats on the stage itself; and in the theaters for which Beaumarchais and Sheridan composed their comedies the stage jutted out far into the house, so that the actors actually turned their backs on a certain proportion of the audience. But in the final quarter of the nineteenth century this platform-stage gave way to the picture-frame stage to which we are accustomed in our snug modern theaters; and nowadays the actor is not in close proximity to the spectators; he is not surrounded by them on three sides; he is withdrawn behind a picture-frame; and he is bidden not to get out of the picture.

THE PICTURE-FRAME STAGE OUSTS THE PLATFORM

This change from the platform-stage of the past to the picture-frame stage of the present is perhaps the most important which has ever taken place in all the long history of the drama; and it is too recent for us to forecast all its consequences, although we may be certain that they will be many and striking, influencing the method of every writer for the stage. As the dramatist always plans his plays with the intent and the desire of seeing them performed before an audience, by actors and in a theater, any change in the conditions of the theater will force changes in the method of both actors and dramatist, and it may also bring about changes in the unconscious preferences of the audience. It is an interesting question whether these changes will or will not invalidate in any way the accredited theory of the theater as this has been expounded by Lessing and Aristotle, who had no other plays as a basis of study than those composed

in accord with the conditions of the platform-stage; and even Sarcey could see only the beginnings of the more modern drama composed specifically for the picture-frame stage.

The audiences of the past who knew only the platform-stage, expected to see thereon a story, with a well-knit plot, setting forth a clash of contending desires. Will the spectators of the future, sitting in front of the picture-frame stage, retain this expectation? Or will they be contented with pictures of life and character held together by a slacker thread of story, scarcely strong enough to be called a plot, and lacking in any clearly defined conflict of volition? More than twenty years ago, Mr. William Archer, that acutest of British dramatic critics, posed this question clearly: "What is the essential element of drama? Is it the telling of a story after a certain established method which has been found by long experience to answer to the mental requirements of an average audience? Or is it the mere scenic presentation of passages from real life? Should the dramatist look primarily to action, letting character take its chance? Or primarily to character, letting action look after itself?"

Mr. Archer expressed his own sympathy with the latter opinion, holding that it was supplanting the former, which he admitted to have been dominant for fifty years and which he identified with Sarcey. But he might have identified it with Aristotle and admitted that it had been dominant for two thousand years. Nothing could be clearer or more emphatic than Aristotle's assertion that if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, "you will not produce the essential dramatic effect nearly so well as with a play, which, however deficient in these aspects yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents." To this Mr. Archer might answer that when Aristotle and Sarcey insisted on the superior value of plot over character in arousing and retaining the interest of the average audience, they could not foresee that the spectators of the future in front of a picture-frame stage might not have precisely the same unconscious preferences as the spectators of the past almost surrounding the platform-stage—especially after these spectators may have had their interest focused on character, rather than on story, by the works of the many realists who have trod the trail first blazed by Balzac.

And to this retort, the rejoinder is easy,—indeed, Mr. Archer may despise it as a little too easy. Admitting that the change in the playhouse may bring about an unforeseen change in the attitude of the more highly cultivated playgoers, still it is a little unlikely that the theories of the theater which we find expounded by Aristotle first, then by Lessing, and lastly by Sarcey, will turn out to be any less valid in the next century than they have proved themselves to be in the past twenty centuries. This much at least I may venture to predict without assuming the part of a prophet—an unbecoming costume which I should not dare to don so long as I recall George Eliot's assertion, that "of all the forms of human error prophecy is the most gratuitous."

Brander Matthews